

**SPEECH BY THE OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT
THE JAWAHARLAL NEHRU MEMORIAL LECTURE ON
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU AND THE MAKING OF MODERN
INDIA**

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I am honoured to deliver the 46th Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture being organized on the occasion of the 125th birth anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru. I am grateful to Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson and the Trustees of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund for this invitation.

It is not easy to do justice to Jawaharlal Nehru's remarkable life as well as his contribution to the making of a modern India in a short lecture. I shall however strive today to briefly cover some of his views, his actions and the legacy he left behind.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In May of this year, India saw a peaceful transfer of power from one political formation to another for the eighth time since 1952. On September 24, 2014, the Mars Mission launched by the Indian Space Research Organization entered the orbit of the red planet. In 2008, India and United States concluded a Civil Nuclear

Agreement which recognized India as a State with advanced nuclear technologies and brought India into the international nuclear mainstream.

What I have cited above are three important but different moments in India's recent history. But, a common thread which runs through them and what they dramatically illustrate is how Nehru's legacy is not just intact, but continues to lead modern day India to new heights of achievement.

Nehru's services to India are immeasurable. He was one of the greatest figures of our times. Nehru had a clear vision of what modern India should look like and he set out to realize his dreams by establishing strong pillars which would support the young nation. If India is a vibrant democracy today, it is because of the foundations laid by Nehru. If India has become the third largest economy in the world in terms of Purchasing Power Parity, it is because of the multi-purpose projects, the public sector undertakings and institutions of higher learning established by Nehru as well as the systematic planning process initiated by him. If India is today counted amongst the technologically advanced nations of the world, it is because of Nehru's promotion of scientific

temper and the chain of scientific research laboratories that he built across the country.

It is Nehru who brought us from a backward and dependent economy to the emerging power we are today. It is he who has equipped Indians with the confidence and ability to ensure that our country obtains its rightful and honoured place amongst the leading nations of the world.

Nehru and the Freedom Movement

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Jawaharlal Nehru's contribution to the freedom movement was unique.

The end of the First World War saw the unravelling of major empires ruled by the Kaiser, the Caliph and the Tsar. In India, 1917 saw the Home Rule Movement commence under the leadership of Dr. Annie Besant. Jawaharlal Nehru, still in his twenties, began his political career as one of the Joint Secretaries of the Home Rule League in Uttar Pradesh with his father Motilal Nehru as President. Jawaharlal Nehru then plunged into the Non-Cooperation movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi and went to jail in December, 1921.

Thereafter, Nehru continued to be in the front ranks of the freedom movement. He became the Congress President at the age of 40 in the Lahore Congress of 1929. The transfer of baton from the father, Motilal Nehru who presided over the Congress Session at Calcutta in 1928 was not just symbolic. It truly meant a transfer of leadership of the Congress to the younger generation. The Lahore Congress declared “Purna Swaraj” as its goal and authorised the launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Nehru then went on to become President of the Congress in the Lucknow Session of 1936, Faizpur Session in 1937 and many more times.

Long before freedom from foreign rule became a reality, Jawaharlal Nehru as President of the Indian National Congress declared in 1936 that India’s ultimate objective was the establishment of “*a democratic state,*” “*full democracy*” and a “*new social and economic order*”¹. Nehru also popularized the demand for a Constituent Assembly to draft India’s Constitution and made it a central issue in the 1937 provincial elections.

1 Address at the Faizpur Congress Session, 27 December, 1936, See Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru/First Series/Vol.7/ (hereafter SWJN/FS/1 etc.) pp. 598-614.

Nehru logged a total of 3262 days in jail during the freedom struggle with 1040 days during the 1942 Quit India Movement as the longest spell. It is during this period that Nehru penned the 1200 page manuscript of *The Discovery of India* while under arrest in Ahmednagar Fort. It was written in flowing hand using rationed war time paper with no cut, blemish or correction. Nehru was prodigiously productive in terms of writing and thinking during his different periods in jail. As is well known, *Glimpses of World History* was written by him in 1934, based on 196 letters written to his young daughter, Indira from various prisons. He covered in these letters the entire history of humankind from 6000 B.C. to the time of writing these letters using only his personal notes and without any reference books.

Nehru's intense passion for India's freedom can be seen from his words of April 1942, "*We want much*", "*Our appetite for freedom is insatiable. We are hungry for it, and our throats are parched with thirst.*"²

²'The Flower of Freedom', *National Herald*, 16 April, 1942 from S. Gopal, ed., *An Anthology*, 1980, p. 59.

Nehru and Parliamentary Democracy

The establishment of full Parliamentary Democracy in India was a momentous step in the history of de-colonization. Nehru played a central role in shaping the process by which limited representative government given by the British in progressive doses was transformed into vibrant and powerful institutions that suited the genius of the Indian people. Democracy, for Nehru, meant a responsible and responsive political system governing through consultation and discussion. There was in him what his biographer S. Gopal calls:

“a granite core of intellectual and moral commitment to democratic values”³.

Moving the ‘Objectives’ Resolution in the Constituent Assembly, Nehru observed “*Whatever system of Government we may establish here must fit in with the temper of our people and be acceptable to them*”⁴.

Nehru established healthy practices and precedents as Leader of the House in the Provisional Parliament of 1950 and in the First, Second, and Third Lok Sabhas

3 Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol 3, 1956-64, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), P. 276.

4 Speech to the Constituent Assembly. See *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru/Second Series/Vol.1/(hereafter SWJN/SS/1 etc.)* pp. 240-251, here p.247.

from 1952 to 1964. He treated Parliament with great respect and sat patiently through long and often tedious debates as an example to his colleagues and young parliamentarians. He spoke frequently in Parliament, and used it as a forum to disseminate his views to the public. Letters from Members of Parliament were invariably replied to personally and promptly. Nehru laid down conventions of lasting value by upholding the Speaker's position in the House.

Nehru promoted frank discussions on subjects of importance in the Houses of Parliament and did not appreciate the use of public interest as a reason to deny information. Nehru was aware that the lack of an established Opposition meant significant weakness in the system. He said:

“I do not want India to be a country in which millions of people say “yes” to one man, I want a strong opposition.”⁵

Most of the time of Parliament Sessions during the first to the third Lok Sabhas were devoted to discussing

⁵ Speech in Trivandrum, 2 June 1950, See Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol 2, 1947-56, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.68.

legislation, budget, Plan and matters related to money and finance. The volume of financial transactions in those days was very meagre. In fact, Jawaharlal Nehru once jokingly commented that the budget of the Government of India is less than the budget of the New York Municipal Corporation. But, this did not prevent Members of Parliament from having full debate on various financial issues, especially the Five Year Plans.

Nehru frequently met Opposition leaders to exchange ideas on crucial issues and asked his Ministers to welcome probing questions and debates. Even though, there was no formal opposition party, Nehru gave highest respect to Opposition leaders like Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Shri Hiren Mukherjee, Shri H.V. Kamath, Shri A.K. Gopalan and Shri Ashok Mehta, all of whom were members of the first Lok Sabha. Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee who was elected to the second Lok Sabha and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia who became member of the third Lok Sabha also received special attention from Nehru.

Nehru took keen interest in the Question Hour and was almost always present during the Hour. Nehru was attentive to the need to preserve and protect the rights and privileges of members. He was also particular that

the dignity and prestige of the House should be maintained at all times.

Nehru had tremendous faith in the capacity of poor, unlettered people to understand issues and exercise reasoned choices. He did not use the excuse of the partition of the country and the consequent communal violence or influx of refugees to postpone elections. On the contrary, he was impatient to go to the people and unhappy that elections could not be held earlier. In the campaign for the first General Elections of 1951-52, Nehru personally travelled some 25,000 miles and addressed around 35 million people or a tenth of India's then population. He educated the people about the value of adult suffrage and their duty to discharge their right to vote with responsibility.

Nehru and Secularism

Nehru was secular to the core. When the French writer André Malraux asked Nehru late in life what had been his most difficult task, he replied, "creating a just state by just means, I think...." And, after a brief pause: "Perhaps creating a secular state in a religious country,

especially when its religion is not founded on an inspired book.”⁶

It was because of Nehru’s consistent efforts that India established itself as a secular state with equal rights for all regardless of their religious affiliation.

Nehru and Empowerment of Women

Nehru was keen that women play their part as equal citizens in the nation. Unlike in the West, women in India got the right to vote at the same time as men, a goal spelt out by the Congress as early as 1928. He said in a speech at Kalyani in 1954 that:

“Women of India must play an adequate role in the building of the country. Without them the country cannot make rapid progress. The state of progress of the country can be known by the condition of its women because they are the makers of the people of the country”⁷.

⁶ André Malraux, *Antimemoirs*, translated by Terence Kilmartin (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968), p. 145.

⁷ Speech at a convention of Women, Kalyani, 23 January 1954. From *Congress Bulletin*, February-March 1954. SWJN/SS/24/p.361-362.

Nehru and Foreign Policy

The aftermath of World War II saw the globe split between two rival power blocs of East and West. For India, more so for Nehru, who as Prime Minister, held the portfolio of foreign affairs for seventeen long years, staying out of military blocs and alliances was essential to maintaining freedom of action for the nascent Indian state. Nehru refused to accept assistance under the Marshall Plan so as not to compromise India's independence in foreign policy matters.

Nehru's policy of non-alignment did not mean equidistance or isolationism. It meant independence of judgment and action. It was not a passive but a pro-active and dynamic policy in which India was strongly committed to the goals of the United Nations and would do its best for peace in the world. Nehru did not wish to involve India in the conflict which the great powers were waging or become a camp follower of any group.

As early as in 1946, India moved a resolution in the United Nations General Assembly condemning racial discrimination in South Africa. India sent troops for peace keeping to the Gaza strip and Congo. India was a tireless campaigner against nuclear weapons and testing

in the oceans and the atmosphere. It played an important role in the conclusion of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963. Today, when the Cold War has passed into history books, it should be kept in mind that Nehru's foreign policy was rooted in the sound, consistent principle of "India first".

Nehru and the building of India's economy

India emerged from colonial rule a mostly agrarian country. Agriculture had been virtually stagnant for half a century and the average rate of economic growth was less than one percent. Against this dismal backdrop, the first fifteen years saw an estimated GDP growth at 4% and nearly 2 percent per capita (as opposed to 0.1 percent in the years 1900-47). This was a historic turning point and India was on par with the best performing economies of its time, ahead of China, UK, Japan⁸.

Congress President Subash Chandra Bose in 1938 set up a National Planning Committee with Jawaharlal Nehru as its Chairman. Jawaharlal Nehru included in it

⁸ Pulapre Balakrishnan, *Economic Growth in India: History and Prospect*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.56 and 58-59.

not just politicians but scientists, economists, businessmen and industrialists. Planning was seen by Nehru as a vast national endeavour and not just the task of the Planning Commission. The well known economist P.C. Mahalanobis described the Nehruvian approach to planning as the Middle Way or the Middle Path. The Mixed Economy and Welfare State emerged thereafter as important concepts. The setting up of the Planning Commission, the emergence of the public sector, of land reforms, of regulations on industrial monopoly, of state trading were all the result of Nehru's multifaceted initiatives. Nehru also devised the institution of the National Development Council (NDC) to secure national and inter-regional consensus on development programmes. The NDC has been described as an example of federalism in action.

Nehru oriented the country to the socialist path by including the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution. It was at the historic Avadi Session of the Indian National Congress in 1955, that the Congress gave itself, formally, the creed of a socialistic pattern of society. The Session coincided with the launch of the Second Five Year Plan. From then onwards, vigorous utilization of resources, rapid industrialization and

achieving equitable distribution became the nation's priorities.

Nehru has been criticised in later years for having accorded primacy to the Government in economic matters. These policies must be however seen in the context of Nehru's times. Capital formation in a society, exploited for 190 years was a huge task which could not be left to the private sector alone. Planning helped allocate scarce resources in accordance with national priorities. The relative merit of a regulated economy was widely accepted those days.

Nehru's efforts did not throttle private initiative. The private sector continued to play an important role, especially in agriculture and small and medium industries. In fact, during the early days of independence, even the private sector supported the idea of a key role for government in creating economic growth. Moreover, many private sector companies received strong support from public sector financial institutions, enabling them turn into domestic giants in their respective fields.

Nehru's speech at the inauguration of the Bhakra Nangal Dam still remains in memory as one of his finest ever.

“For me, the temples, the gurudwaras, the churches, the mosques of today are these places where human beings labour for the benefit of other human beings, of humanity as a whole. They are the temples of today. I feel more, if I may use the word, religious-minded when I see these great works than when I see any temple or any place of pure worship. These are the places of worship because here we worship something; we build up Indians; we build up the millions of India and so this is a sacred task”⁹.

Investment in steel and fertilisers, hydro-electric dams and aluminium smelters had an all round effect on the economy. Growth rates in agriculture during 1950-65 averaged 2.6 percent, higher than in the entire first half of the 20th century in India.

9 At the inauguration of the Bhakra-Nangal, 8 July 1954. See SWJN/SS/26/pp.130-143, here p. 143.

S. Gopal has summarised Nehru's achievements as follows: *“He consolidated a nation, trained it for democracy, constructed a model for economic development and set the country on the path to growth¹⁰.”*

Nehru and Science

Nehru believed that caste prejudices, religious bigotry, social inequalities etc. could be eliminated only by developing a scientific spirit in our social relations and mental habits. Along with scientific achievement, the development of a scientific frame of mind and a scientific habit of thinking was equally important. Science was not only a search for truth, but also meant for the betterment of man.

A Science Policy was adopted by the Government and scientific laboratories set up across the country. Indian Institutes of Technology were established to nurture manpower in engineering. Frontier disciplines such as space and atomic energy came under the personal supervision of the Prime Minister.

10 Sarvepalli Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Vol. 3, 1956-64: p.302.

Conclusion

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we tend to take for granted the success of our Parliamentary Democracy. It must be however kept in mind that in many newly independent nations, first generation nationalist leaders concentrated all power in their own hands and were succeeded by military rulers. It was Jawaharlal Nehru and other founding fathers who ensured that on gaining independence, power was transferred to the people of India through adoption of the Constitution and regular free and fair elections.

At the time of independence, it was widely believed that India would soon lapse into authoritarianism and the democratic experiment will collapse. India consolidated itself in the difficult formative years of its nation-building because of the strong and stable system of parliamentary democracy established by Nehru.

The challenge that India faced and the importance of her success has been well described by former Prime Minister of Britain, Sir Anthony Eden:

*“Of all the experiments in government, which have been attempted since the beginning of time, I believe that the Indian venture into parliamentary government is the most exciting. A vast sub-continent is attempting to apply to its tens and thousands of millions a system of free democracy. It is a brave thing to try to do so. The Indian venture is not a pale imitation of our practice at home, but a magnified and multiplied reproduction on a scale we have never dreamt of. If it succeeds, its influence on Asia is incalculable for good. Whatever the outcome, we must honour those who attempt it.”*¹¹

Nehru when once asked what his legacy to India would be, replied: *“Hopefully, it is four hundred million people capable of governing themselves”*¹².

In the words of S Gopal,

“Achieved against daunting odds, democracy in India - Adult suffrage, a sovereign Parliament, a free press,

11 A. Eden, Full Circle (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Company 1960), p.246

12 “Talk with the PM” by Norman Cousins, The Saturday Review, May 27, 1961, pp. 10-13

an independent judiciary - is Nehru's most lasting monument."¹³

Jawaharlal Nehru's life and vision, his struggles and his achievements were no less than epic. But it is his deep democratic spirit and practice of a politics vested in the sovereignty of the people that is his most precious legacy to us. The manner in which 66.4% of our 834 million strong electorate exercised their vote in the recent elections to the 16th Lok Sabha is the best validation of Nehru's efforts in the above regard.

Democracy has struck deep roots in India and survived against enormous odds thanks to Nehru's stewardship of the nation in its early years. Every one of our institutions from the independent judiciary and free press to the legislatures and the Election Commission bear the hallmark of Nehru.

Looking ahead, we must renew afresh the imperative of protecting and strengthening our democratic institutions and practices. Imperfect they may be, but

13 S Gopal Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography, Vol.3, 1956-64 (published 1984) Harvard University Press, p.279

they represent the best way forward for our nation as we forge ahead into the 21st century.

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I conclude this memorial lecture saluting and paying my humble respects to Jawahar, the Jewel of India. India is what it is today because of Nehru, his vision and his lifetime of dedication to the nation. Let us celebrate his legacy and draw inspiration from his life to take our nation towards greater and greater glory.

Thank you,

Jai Hind.